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The Damsel Can Rescue Herself: Subverting Common Literary Tropes of the Fantasy Genre

Melissa Hurlburt

Honors Senior Thesis

Spring 2018

Advisor: Professor Jaed Coffin

1. Prelude

The young girl slipped out of the house in the middle of the night, when the rest of its inhabitants were sound asleep in their beds. She did not bring anything with her – no food, no change of clothes. Nothing but the shoes on her feet, the clothes she was wearing, and her cloak.

She had spent weeks teaching herself to pick locks in secret, and now she used that skill, slipping out the front door right under her sleeping master's nose. And just like that – just like that she was free.

When the sun rose in the morning, it illuminated the dusty road before her. She had made good time, and she was already far away from that house and that village. They would not find her, of that she was confident.

But the young girl still had a long road ahead of her. A long, dirt road leading to the capital city of Monadh.

It did not matter.

She was headed home.

2. Preparations

Chaos. Absolute and utter chaos.

That was the only word Taye knew to describe the scene unfolding around her, bodies and laughter and light merging, tugging at her as she stood at the edge of the room.

“Has anyone seen my shoe?”

Taye shook her head at the question, but couldn't help grinning as she watched Hamish, the troupe's bard, ducking his head under every piece of furniture in the room. Two more joined in the search, and soon nearly the whole troupe was looking high and low for a left shoe with a

splash of red on the toe. Taye, content to watch from the doorway and secure in the knowledge that her own costume was tucked safely away upstairs, felt warmth spreading in her chest as the chaos unfolded around her.

There was nothing quite like watching a circus troupe's preparations for a performance. These moments before the performance – they were stressful, they were a whirlwind of bodies and costumes and sound, and they were home.

A shout of “Found it” was followed immediately by the follow-up question “has anyone seen my pants?” and Taye decided it was time to retreat.

She pulled herself away from the chaos and jogged up the stairs to her room. Her bed creaked a greeting as she sat on it, reaching beneath the frame to pull out two wooden chests. One was painted a brilliant gold and red, the colors dancing in a delicate wreath of flames across the wooden surface. The other was simpler, unfinished wood with a small lock forged from dulled iron. The matching key burned warmly against her chest, but she shook her head. Later. Instead, she opened the second chest, which contained her own costume – a white body suit, a pattern of glittering red and gold splashed across it like a sunrise.

“Stop admiring your costume and put it on, we’re going to be late as it is.”

Taye looked up to see Adamina, the troupe's leader, standing in her doorway. She was already in full costume, fiery red hair spilling onto an equally red dress. Taye could hardly see the scars on her arm, partially covered as they were with the golden arm bands Adamina wore to protect herself from the flames she danced with on stage.

“We’re never late,” said Taye, though she stood up and slid the plain chest back underneath her bed.

“Because the king would have our heads.” Adamina was only half-jesting.

“He wouldn’t have to, because you’d have them first!” Hamish, fortunately, had chosen that moment to come running down the hallway. He winked as he passed them.

“What did you lose this time?” Taye called after him.

“My flute!”

Adamina shook her head and sighed, although when she looked at Taye a light danced in her eyes. This wasn’t just home for Taye, it was home for all of the circus performers. Drunken bards and grumpy leaders included.

“Are you going to be okay?” asked Adamina.

Taye stepped behind her wooden screen to change. She’d known it was coming, but that didn’t mean she hated the question any less. The first time Adamina had asked her, years ago now, Taye had cried, too weak and raw to control her tears yet. The second and third time, the words had chafed against the dam she had built, but it had held and so had her tears. Now, she hardly flinched.

“You ask me that before every performance,” she said.

“Because your parents-”

“My parents have been dead for six years. I’m fine.”

Adamina was silent for a moment. Taye wondered, pulling her costume up over her torso, if she had left. But a moment later she spoke, and the pity that Taye so hated was gone from her voice, thank the seven gods. “We’re leaving soon, with or without you.”

Taye poked her head out so that Adamina could see as she rolled her eyes. They weren’t leaving this house without their star performer, and they both knew it.

3. Performance

The stands at the palace arena that night were overflowing into the streets. Nobles and citizens alike spilled out of the main gate and into the narrow cobblestoned lanes lined with sandstone buildings. Street vendors pushed through the crowd, waving wares that ranged from rare scorpion delicacies imported from Azar in the south, to rough, handmade reproductions of the troupe's costumes. There was no particular holiday to mark today's performance. The king had simply declared a night of celebration, and the city had responded.

The sounds of the crowd greeted Taye as she walked out onto the arena. The sandy ground was soft beneath her bare feet, and she let it carry her as she made her way across to the booth where the king was seated. The flush of alcohol stained his narrow face, and he watched her with eyes that traversed the length of her body. Gritting her teeth, a familiar warm fire settling in her belly, she brought a smile to her lips and dipped low into a bow.

As she rose, she caught the gaze of the prince, perched on a seat next to his father. Prince Macall was the opposite of the king, wearing simple but elegant clothes to his father's patterned brocade and rich velvet cloak, a single ring on each hand rather than the blinding glitter adorning the king's. Despite his grin, Taye watched as a hand drifted to smooth through his short auburn hair, a nervous tick that gave away the performance in his smile. He nodded to her, and she stuck her tongue out at him, a quick, crude gesture that immediately brought heat to her cheeks. She hoped no one else had seen. But it didn't matter as Macall, crown prince to the throne of Monadh and her best friend, smiled a genuine smile. If he could do this, so could she.

The silks, when she walked up to them, greeted her as an old friend. She gripped them in both hands, the smooth fabric flowing from ceiling to ground and quieting the roar of the fire within her, even as the audience grew louder. And then she began to climb the fabric.

Muscles shaking, breath coming in controlled puffs between gritted teeth, Taye climbed. She climbed, the silks wrapping around her feet, until her head nearly brushed the ceiling. In a motion so swift that those watching could barely follow, she wrapped the silk loosely around her waist, flipping upside down so that her legs faced the ceiling, her hands turning white as they gripped the fabric. She posed for the audience, swimming her legs back and forth as though walking across open air, the dizzying height she had reached bringing a grin to her face.

And then she let go.

She plummeted toward the ground, body tense, cries rising around her. For a moment she flew, hair a crown around her head, arms outstretched, weightless. Then the fabric cinched tight around her waist, catching her with her arms outstretched and her feet pointed, body horizontal to the ground. Her hair brushed the floor.

With an ease that came from years of practice, Taye righted herself and continued her performance. She moved from one pose to another, swimming between the silks, dancing even as she was suspended in the air. The fabric flowed around her, an extension of her body as she spun and twisted and climbed and dropped.

Finally, slowly, she ended her performance. Her feet slid to the ground, touching down with a lightness that she didn't feel – not entirely. And as she stepped away from the silks and turned back toward the king, she was reminded of why. She was reminded of why, even as she bowed to the sounds of cheers coming from the audience, ducking low to hide the tremble in her muscles. It was a tremble that stemmed not entirely from exhaustion, and as she looked to the king of Monadh, seated in his throne with a cup of ale pressed to his lips, her grin faltered. He raised his cup to her, and she bowed to him again to hide the grimace that had come unbidden to

her face. It was no easy thing, performing under the leering, drunken gaze of the man who had killed her parents.

4. Secrets

The merriment at the circus house that night was twofold as its members and many invited guests laughed over goblets of wine, drunk from both the alcohol and the success of the evening's performance. Taye could not partake.

Instead, she made her way up the stairs to her room, closing the door behind her and sink onto her bed. The smell of alcohol and burning firewood lingered for a moment, and she scrunched her nose. She had no patience for alcohol. It made those who drank it weak both of mind and body, and she had no desire to be either. She shuddered to think of the way secrets so easily fell from drunken lips, of the way memory became pliant and the body treacherous.

Shaking her head, she reached for the bindings of her costume and slipped free. The cloth she'd used to bind her breasts was stained with sweat, and her skin was calloused from years of it chaffing against her ribs. Her hand went to her side, where a mark from the silks burned, red and puffy. She touched it gingerly, the familiarity of its sting sending a brief smile to her lips.

Taye reached under her bed, pulling out the small, locked chest. She ran a hand over the unfinished wood. Her father had never had the chance to paint it.

Pulling away from that thought before the wave of memories began, she took the key from her neck and unlocked the chest, pulling out the bundle of dark clothes that sat inside. She changed into them, hurried, the black tunic and black trousers hugging her skin with barely a whisper. They were like a second skin, these clothes, and she instantly felt better for having them on. With these clothes, she could move like a wraith through the darkened night. With her hair

pulled back into a tight bun, with the mask that she now slipped over her eyes and the two silver daggers she sheathed beneath her sleeves, she could be untouchable. She *was* untouchable. A shadow. And as she padded over to her window, easing it open and slipping out and down the long trellis of vines placed here for exactly that purpose, she became something else entirely.

She became *Saorsa*.

5. Saorsa

The black clothing camouflaged her as she made her way through the cobbled streets of Bruadar, hugging the shadows of the sandstone buildings, smoothing the daggers sheathed against the skin of her wrist with her fingers. The movement was one of habit – she wouldn’t need them tonight, if all went according to plan. Her mission tonight was to threaten, to scare, but not to draw blood. At least – not first blood.

As Taye walked, she passed makeshift signs hanging in windows and crudely drawn symbols etched into wood and stone, all of the mark of Saorsa. To many of the citizens of Bruadar – and of Monadh, for her fame had begun to spread – Saorsa was a nuisance, robbing them of both goods and peace of mind. To the others, Saorsa – freedom, in their language – was hope.

She stopped at a door bearing her mark. It was slightly ajar, and she could hear a low murmur of voices coming from within. She bent her head to listen.

“Is he real?” a young child asked, voice skeptical and hopeful at once.

Most thought Saorsa to be a man, because of how Taye bound her chest and wound her hair into a tight bun. Most probably respected her more for it, too – a thought that chafed. But it was effective, and that was more important to those who directed her movements.

“Of course Saorsa is real,” a woman about Taye’s age answered. Sister or mother, Taye wasn’t sure. “He protects the likes of you and me. You shouldn’t disrespect him.”

Taye knocked, then pushed the door open. The two turned to her, freezing – first to be caught talking of such a treasonous person, then in shock as they realized who stood in their doorway. Taye took in their dark brown eyes, their snow white hair stained brown with faded dye, and smiled at them.

“You – you...” the woman stuttered.

Taye reached into her sleeve and withdrew one of her silver daggers. The woman’s eyes widened, but Taye just placed the dagger, hilt-first, on the small, lopsided table next to them.

“Melt it down,” she said, keeping her voice as low and deep as she could. “There’s enough silver there to keep you fed for a month.”

Before either of them could respond, she turned and walked out the door.

Her arm felt bare without the weight of the knife, but she reminded herself that she still had one knife left should she need it. Which she wouldn’t. If her mission went according to plan, she shouldn’t even run into anyone else.

Of course her mission wasn’t going to go to plan.

She’d barely rounded the next corner when she glimpsed a cloaked figure slipping through the darkness ahead of her. Had it been anyone else, she would have paused, waiting for whoever it was to disappear, before continuing on her way. But she recognized that cloak immediately – the soft folds that had never seen a dirty city street in their lives, the dark swirling pattern inching its way across the back. Macall.

“Idiot,” she hissed, treading lightly over the uneven cobblestones as she followed him.

It took barely a minute for him to get into trouble. She'd been eyeing the small chest nestled under his arm, wondering what he was doing out here in the middle of the night, so absorbed in her study of him that she didn't notice the man with the knife until he was already lunging toward Macall from the shadows.

Macall threw himself backward, slamming into the opposite wall of the narrow alleyway. The chest nearly slipped from his fingers, but he gripped it tighter. The attacker lunged again, knife in the air. Macall raised his free hand to shield himself.

Taye barreled into the attacker, knocking him off balance. The knife clattered to the ground. The man stumbled but quickly regained his footing, whirling and running at Taye. She side-stepped and he missed, careening past her. She lifted a booted foot to his back, kicking. He fell to the ground with a grunt and Taye unsheathed her knife, waiting, breathing heavy. She wouldn't use her knife if she didn't have to.

Macall came off the wall, starting toward her, but she held out a hand to stop him. To her surprise, he listened, and leaned back against the wall just as the man on the ground slowly picked himself up. He eyed the knife in her hand and began backing away, one hand going to his waist where Taye noticed a glint of silver. But then his eyes flicked beyond her face, to a point behind her. A grin spread across his face even as he clutched his side in pain.

Taye whirled around, afraid that she'd see another attacker poised to harm Macall. There was no one. Instead, she was shoved from behind as the man lunged again, pushing her aside as his knife – the glint of silver she'd seen earlier – swept toward Macall. Still off-balance, she propelled herself forward, driving her knife to the hilt in the man's sternum. He looked at her, surprise etched across his dirty face. His mouth opened and she noted his missing teeth and foul

breath. More than that, though, her eyes were drawn to his hair, peeking out from where the hood of his ratty cloak had slipped back. It was white as a cloud.

And then he collapsed onto the stone of the alley, blood pooling around him. He was dead.

Taye stepped back, eyes glued to the body. He hadn't been an assassin, as she'd assumed. He'd been a homeless man. He'd been ----. One of her people. And she'd killed him. She'd *killed* him.

"Thank you," Macall stepped away from the wall, voice shaky and face white as he tried not to look at the body. The body that Taye had put there. "You..." he frowned. "You're bleeding." He pointed to her side, where a sticky red substance indeed had started staining through her shirt. She cursed – the man must have grazed her with his knife in his attack. It didn't hurt yet – but she was sure it would start soon.

"Are you..." Macall's voice trailed off as he took in her black clothes, her mask. "It's *you*."

Taye started at the change in his tone. He was looking at her, no doubt horrified that his savior had turned out to be the throne's number one enemy. But she didn't – she couldn't care, not when that *body* laid there, limp. She couldn't – she couldn't –

She turned and fled the alleyway, leaving her second knife stuck in the dead body of her countryman.

6. The Prince

Taye hadn't been able to complete her mission after that. Instead, she'd slunk back to her rooms, going straight to the bathroom and scrubbing the blood off her hand and sleeve as she

tried not to cry, or be sick, or both. She'd gritted her teeth as she wrapped her now-throbbing side in cloth. It wasn't a deep cut, thank ----, and it had already stopped bleeding. But it was right on top of her silk burn from earlier, and --- it hurt.

It paled in comparison to the guilt she felt for killing that man, though. She'd shaken her head against the feeling. *I am strong enough to handle this*, she'd told herself over and over. *He was trying to kill the prince*. She'd fallen into an uneasy sleep, the words still repeating themselves in her mind.

The next morning, she slipped out before anyone else woke, unable to face Hamish or Adamina or any of the others who had been counting on her. Instead she made her way to the palace, down the same bright and bustling streets that had seemed so empty and dark just last night. Every step matched the rhythm in her head. *He was trying to kill the prince. He was trying to kill the prince*. Her side ached, but she ignored it.

The guards let her in without question. The kingdom placed a high value on entertainment, so much so that a performer's status rivaled that of the lesser nobility. It didn't hurt that she visited Macall and the palace so often that most of the guards had come to know her by name. That did not denote any sort of friendliness on her part, however, as most of the guards either leered at her as she passed, or registered no threat from her presence, writing her off as a mere girl. They'd learned to stop making such comments out loud, however, after Taye had lost her temper and found herself holding a guard by the neck of his uniform, outstretched over the deep moat that surrounded the outer walls of the palace. Any common person would have likely been flayed or hung, but Taye's status as an acrobat had meant the king had just laughed and waved his guards' complaints away when told the story.

Now Taye moved quickly through the gate, taking the servant's side door to avoid the fanfare that usually came with entering through the front doors. She followed the twisting corridors, marking the tapestries as she made her way the Macall's chambers. She was sure the prince would be there – after last night, he wouldn't leave his rooms, or at the very least would not venture outside the palace walls.

She rapped on the ornate wooden door twice, then waited. The door creaked open, Macall peeking out. He flashed her a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes when he saw her.

"Breakfast?" he asked after a brief pause, pointing to the elaborate spread that his servant, Haddow, had just finished setting out on the parlor table.

Taye grabbed a sausage link and stuffed it in her mouth in answer.

Macall perched on the sofa opposite the table, watching her. She raised an eyebrow at him in an unspoken question.

"I'm fine," he said, an edge to his voice.

"No you're not." She grabbed a roll, still warm from the kitchen.

Macall didn't lie again, but he didn't respond either. Taye held a roll out to him, but he shook his head. She took a seat at the table, dangling her feet over the arm of the chair and hiding a wince as she stretched her side too far. She grabbed more food and ate while she waited.

"Taye," Macall finally said, but his voice sound strange. Too quiet, hitching at the end.

Taye looked up from where she'd become absorbed in the food. Macall was sitting heavily in the sofa, his head braced in his hands. She stood and walked over to him, sitting on the arm of the sofa. He flinched. That was new.

“Talk me through it,” she said, all challenge gone from her voice. Because she knew he’d been sitting there, sinking farther and farther into his thoughts, until he couldn’t make his way back up to the surface. That’s how he’d always described it.

Macall took a shaky breath. “I went into the city last night to hand out coins.” That must have been what was in the chest he’d been carrying. And the attacker must have seen him handing out the coins, and decided to corner him in a dark alleyway.

He was trying to kill the prince.

“I was... attacked,” he continued between shallow breaths. “And I – I thought I was going to die, but then this person came out of nowhere and fought him off – killed him – but you- I mean...” he stopped, his breath coming in shallow, fast gasps now. “I can’t. I can’t.”

Taye grabbed his hand, squeezing it in hers. “Breathe,” she said. “Just focus on breathing, okay?”

Macall was shaking. “I can’t. I can’t.” He was staring at the place where their hands were joined.

“Yes, you can. I promise, okay? Just breathe.”

Macall sucked in a shaky, deep breath, but then shook his head. So Taye began, softly, to recite a poem. The foreign words, the words of her people, words that Macall could not understand, tangled on her tongue, tripping over memories even as the sounds themselves fell easily from her lips. But she spoke them anyway.

At last, Macall raised his head. Tears stained his cheeks, and his face was red, but at least he was breathing. Taye squeezed his hand one last time and stood up, pulling him up with her.

“Now eat,” she pointed to the table still full of food.

As he ate, she grabbed another roll of her own, and watched him. Theirs was an odd friendship. It wouldn't have even happened had it not been for her being in the training courts at the right time. Macall had been practicing with a sword when he'd suddenly collapsed, shaking much as he had been moments ago. Taye had been using a doorframe to hoist herself up and down, muscles burning, and she'd watched as a small crowd had gathered around the prince. Someone had tried to push through to help him, but he'd been held back by Macall's trainer.

"Let him be, or risk interrupting his vision." Taye's mouth had dropped when she'd overheard that.

She dropped to the ground and jogged over to the crowd, pushing through and ignoring everyone's protests.

"Hey," she'd said. "Talk to me." When he hadn't been able to, she'd grabbed his hands and squeezed them in hers, reciting the poem. She'd had to make up three verses before he'd calmed down enough to stand.

At that point Taye had whirled on the men surrounding them. All were of a lower rank than her, so she let free the full force of her fury. "Idiots!" she fumed. "Are all of you so stupid? He's not having *visions*! He's not some prophet! Have you ever even taken him to see a proper physician? He just has an anxious heart."

She'd ignored the spluttering indignance of the men around her, grabbed Macall by the arm, and towed him out of the practice arena.

"Thank you," he'd said, once they were away from the crowd. "Where did you learn that?"

“My sister,” Taye had answered, and maybe he had sensed her unwillingness to say any more, because he hadn’t asked any more questions. That had been that, and they had been friends ever since.

“I saw Saorsa,” Macall said at last, breaking the silence that had fallen as they’d finished the last of the breakfast spread.

Taye raised a careful eyebrow, meeting his eyes. “And?”

“She saved my life.”

Taye’s stomach somersaulted. “She?”

Macall seemed to consider his next words before he spoke. “Saorsa is a woman. I saw her-” here he went a shade of red and stumbled over his words. “Not actually, just the outline of them- you know what I mean.”

“You couldn’t have, I-” Taye bit her tongue so hard she winced. The words had just slipped out, her traitorous lips doing nothing to hold back her confession that she was Saorsa.

“What?” Macall asked. “You know something about her?”

Taye cast around in her mind for an excuse, got a bite, and slowly started edging toward the door. “No, I just remembered. I told Adamina I’d train with her today. I have to go.”

“Even with your side?” Macall pointed to her injured abdomen.

She clapped a hand over it. She hadn’t thought it had been that obvious. But Macall was perceptive. She pushed open the door, turning back to answer him. “I’ll be fine.” She winked at him, letting the door close behind her.

Her footsteps were nearly as quick as the pounding of her heart as she all but sprinted away.

7. Training

Taye's side healed quickly. A surprising fact, given the amount of time she spent training – climbing the silks until her arms gave out, running until she couldn't feel her legs and rivulets of sweat dripped from every part of her. Adamina, then Hamish, had tried to ask her about the other night, but she'd refused to talk about it beyond a curt acknowledgement that she hadn't completed the job.

He'd tried to kill the prince.

He probably had a family. A wife and two little girls, smaller than children their age should be. Always watching him with their big, hopeful eyes. They'd loved him, even when he had come home empty handed. It was still better than what they'd left. The lost kingdom of Azar.

She saw them. Saw their long trek north through the forestlands of Southern Monadh, saw them walking tall and proud, despite their slowly dwindling supplies. Saw the older sister help the younger one up from the ground when she fell, encouraging her to continue with bright smiles and hopeful promises. Saw them run out of supplies right before reaching Bruadar, run out of money, run out of food. Nearly to their destination – to Stjarna in the north – and they could go no further.

She saw them search for a house in the city, finally purchasing one under their mother's Monadh name, with her pale skin and fiery red hair. She saw them live a quiet and unobtrusive life.

She saw the pair of them stoned by a group of drunken young men, encouraged by onlooking soldiers, encouraged too by years of the king's preaching about the evils of immigrants. Saw left to bleed to death in the streets, the elder daughter hiding the younger's face as they watched from the window of their home –

No. That wasn't right.

She had killed this man. She had become the villain in her own story. She had killed him, her countryman, she had *killed* him, she had –

He was going to kill the prince.

And so she threw herself into her training, sweat dripping from her face instead of tears, teeth gritted, fists clenched, heart pounding loud enough to drown out the echoes of her parents' screams.

8. Secrets

Nearly a week had passed before she realized she hadn't heard from Macall since that morning. He would usually drop by if he was walking around the city – which was something he often did. Perhaps he had stopped by while she was training, and she hadn't noticed – but when she asked Adamina, she hadn't seen him.

"You done having your little fit, though? 'Cause we need you." Adamina stood in the doorway of Taye's room, nodding at the pile of black cloth on Taye's lap.

Taye smoothed a hand over the fabric. An invisible string threaded from her to the costume, a familiar tug that always guided her as she slipped it on. Her muscles ached from weariness even as her heart ached to slip on the guise again – but she couldn't. Not when she'd betrayed the very cause she was supposed to lead.

"Listen," Adamina's tone, playful moments before, had suddenly taken on a razor-sharp edge. "I don't know what happened, because you won't tell me, but I can guess. We all make mistakes, Taye, and we all get over them. You need to stop wallowing in self-pity. I don't care if you forgive yourself and become at peace with the world or some bullshit, or if you have to

shove that shit so deep down you can't ever find it again, but you need to get over yourself. You're not helping any of us."

Taye felt each of the words hit their mark. Adamina was right. She was being selfish. But she bristled. Adamina thought she couldn't handle this. She didn't think Taye was strong enough – she looked at Taye and saw a girl whose strength had crumbled in the face of the smallest challenge.

Taye stood abruptly, shoving Saorsa's costume back into its chest and under her bed. She stalked up to Adamina, fuming, words building a dam in the back of her throat.

Instead, she pushed past Adamina, slipping away and making for the street without a word.

She'd made it barely two blocks, no destination in mind, when she stopped short. A young woman had stumbled out of a pub, falling to her knees on the hard cobblestone with a crack that made Taye wince. Taye was too far away to smell anything, but she could tell from here that the woman would reek of alcohol. It was just after mid-day.

Taye had taken two more steps when two men emerged from the pub behind the woman, both also clearly stinking of alcohol. Their gazes were fixed on the woman, now weaving heavily from side to side as she attempted to walk down the street. The matching toothy grins on their faces made Taye's blood curdle.

By the time she'd pushed her way through the busy street to them, one man had the woman by an arm.

"Come on, baby, let's take you home," he was saying.

“Let go of her.” Taye walked until she was face-to-face with the bigger man, the one who had the girl by the arm. She was so close she could smell the alcohol on his breath, and she forced away a gag.

“Why? You wanna come too?”

“She doesn’t want to come with you. Let go of her.” The words spat themselves like poison from Taye’s lips.

“Or what? You’ll make me?” the chuckle the man let out then, the way he so casually dismissed her as less than a threat, sent Taye’s very blood boiling. She adjusted her step and brought her knee, hard, up to the man’s groin, slamming the flat of her hand into his face in the same moment.

He lost his grip on the girl, and she went flying to the cobblestones again. Taye hardly noticed. The man stumbled a half-step backwards, then roared as he came back at her. She made to slip under his reach, only to find a hand locked onto her wrist, twisting and pinning it behind her back as another calloused, dirty hand, snaked around her waist tight enough to impede her breath. She’d forgotten about his companion.

“Gotcha,” he growled in her ear, his breath hot.

“Do you?” Taye slammed her head backwards into the man’s face, hearing something crack even as the world dimmed for a moment and a dull pain shot through her own head. The grip around her waist loosened and she slipped free.

“Stupid bitch!” the second man had a hand to his face, where blood was streaming from his nose. “Broke my nose!”

His other hand was still tight around Taye’s wrist, and the first man was reaching for her even as she went to break the grip, and her head was throbbing now, and –

“What is the meaning of this?”

The voice – Prince Macall’s voice – sounded sharp and crisp against the commotion of the brawl.

The hand vanished from her wrist immediately, and Taye stumbled a half-step away as the two men hastily backed away.

“Sorry, yer Highness, er, we were just – you see-” the two men turned and ran.

“Are you okay?”

Taye, who had been looking between Macall and the men, turned back to Macall. “I’m fine,” she began, but stopped as she realized he wasn’t talking to her.

The young woman sat huddled on the ground, her back against the wall and her tattered cloak drawn tightly around her, obscuring most of her features. Taye could see streaks of red across her palms, probably from the few times she’d fallen to the ground.

Macall spoke to her in low tones, and whatever he said seemed to calm her, because her sobs had turned to drunken hiccups. As Taye watched, Macall reached out a hand and helped the young woman to her feet, letting her place a steadying hand on his shoulder when she wobbled. The two of them started down the street. Macall did not look back at Taye.

Annoyed – and curious, Taye followed them. They didn’t go far – just a few blocks to an old tenement building, where the girl nodded and finally let go of Macall’s arm. As she turned to enter the building, her hood slipped from her face. Taye was startled to see a shock of brilliant white hair.

“Did you know she was Azari?” Taye matched Macall’s stride as he resumed walking.

“Couldn’t really miss it.” He still didn’t look at her.

“But if your father hears you helped her – the laws-”

“All my father needs to know is that she was a young girl, and she was in trouble, so I stepped in.”

Taye blinked at the note of challenge in his voice. It was one she hadn’t heard before, and it was directed at her. Well, fine, she could be standoffish, too.

“I didn’t need your help,” she said.

Macall laughed, a bitter note. “Of course you didn’t. It’s not like that was your first fight, or anything.”

“What is that supposed to mean? Even if it had been, do you know how much strength it takes to perform like I do? Enough to hold my own in a fight against two drunks. Why do men always assume that women need their help?” Taye couldn’t hold back the words in her fury.

Macall stopped walking and whirled on her. The look of pure fury in his eyes stopped her in her tracks. Why was he so angry?

“What you do,” he spat. “Is nothing.”

Taye forgot to be confused by his anger in the cloud of red that consumed her. “Nothing?” Several heads turned at her yell. “You’re unbelievable, Macall. I’d like to see you try it.”

“Fine.” Macall turned and started walking again, his posture rigid. “Let’s go.”

They spent the rest of their walk in silence, the tension between them palpable enough to turn those who would have sought a handshake from the crown prince instead pretending not to notice as they scurried by. The training arena was empty when they arrived.

“Boots,” Taye said, pointing to Macall’s feet as she unwound the silk and let it fall to the sandy ground.

He unlaced his boots as she slipped her own off, her bare feet greeting the sand, the brush of silk instantly taking the edge off her anger. But just the edge.

“To climb,” she said, not checking to see if he was watching. “Wrap your foot like this,” she demonstrated. “Flex it, and step on it. And again.” She climbed all the way to the top of the silks, then slid back down and held them out for him.

Macall took the silks from her wordlessly. He copied her movements, stood on the silks for half a second, and slid clumsily to the ground.

“Again.” Taye leaned against a wooden pillar, arms folded over her chest.

Macall tried again, and again, and again, each time making it incrementally farther up the silks before falling back to the ground. His lips were pursed in concentration and although he let out the occasional grunt of frustration, he said nothing to her. He’d made it about four feet from the ground when Taye stepped back up to the silks.

“We can try some things from the ground,” she said. “You don’t have to climb, you just have to be able to wrap your foot like this.”

She showed him how to wrap his feet, and then gave him two basic moves to try. The rhythm of the silks began to take over, and she found her anger at him slipping away. He, too, seemed less angry and more focused on trying to get the maneuvers right. The teaching in itself became a sort of dance – Taye would show him a simple move, he would make a few attempts, she would show him again, and he would eventually find himself in some semblance of the correct position. He was horribly inflexible.

“I’ve never seen you do any of these. Give me something you do,” he said after a while, taking a quick break to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“You don’t see me do these moves because they’re placeholders. I only go into them to move through more complicated moves, moves that you’re not ready for.”

“Teach me.” Some of the fire was back in Macall’s eyes.

The suggestion that he could accomplish what had taken her years in a mere afternoon, that her performance was an easy thing that did not require years of training and discipline, stoked an equal fire in Taye’s blood.

“Fine,” she said, grabbing the silks. “Watch.”

Taye moved through a short sequence of moves, pausing to explain each step to Macall. She stepped back and he all but yanked the silks away from her. It took him less than a minute to get stuck. Taye had to coach him down, but the second his feet hit the ground he was back at the silks, wrapping them around his feet and weaving in between them as he attempted to copy her again. And again when he failed. And again. And again.

Macall attacked the silks until sweat beaded on his brow and his chest heaved.

“Maybe you should sit down for a second,” Taye said when he stumbled away from the silks after nearly an hour had passed.

Macall shook his head, panting too heavily to speak. He wrapped into the silks, his arms shaking with visible fatigue as he moved through the sequence.

“Macall,” Taye said, a warning in her voice.

Macall hung from the silks, one foot wrapped as he tried to wrap himself further. He tried to pull himself up, failed, tried again, and failed again. His arms were shaking, and his hands started to slip from the silks. He wasn’t far from the ground, but his foot was tangled in the silks.

“Idiot,” Taye hissed, grabbing him by the waist and supporting him so that he could stand on his wrapped foot. She coached him back through the silks, and he slowly untangled himself.

His feet had barely hit the ground before he was stumbling away and leaning against a pillar, retching. Taye watched, the edge that had been sharpening within her softening. She walked over to where he now stood, leaning against the pillar for support, arms hanging limp.

“Feel better now?” she asked. “Did you prove whatever the hell it is you were trying to prove?”

Macall didn’t answer at first. She could see his legs trembling with the effort of holding him up, but he refused to slip to the ground. He was relentless, even if he was an idiot – she’d give him that.

“No,” he said finally.

“What?” Taye had forgotten what she’d said.

“I didn’t prove anything. Except what I already knew – I’m not fit to be a prince.”

Taye blinked. “What?”

Macall had never had the most confidence of anyone she knew, but to think he wasn’t good enough to be prince – to be king – that was absurd. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but he continued.

“I’m weak,” he said, voice starting to crack before he regained control of it. “I’m always having these – these – attacks, and I can’t wield a sword the way other knights can, and now I can’t do this-” he gestured to the silks. He stopped, as if realizing he’d said all that out loud. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he looked at Taye. “I can’t be like my father.”

Taye barked out a laugh. “There it is.” She walked back over to the silks, braiding them as she continued. “Look, Macall. You don’t have to be strong, physically, to be a good king. Why is it that all men think they need to have muscles the size of my head? You’re nothing like your father, Macall, and that’s a good thing.”

“Just because you don’t agree with him-”

“No, I don’t agree with him, because *he killed my family.*”

Macall pushed himself off the pillar, all signs of weakness gone in an instant. “My father didn’t kill your family. My father is a good king.”

“A king who leaves its people to die in the streets, who refuses to shelter those in need, is not a good king.” Macall opened his mouth to argue, but Taye cut him off. “Don’t. I see how you are in the streets. You give aid to anyone, regardless of race. And yet it means nothing if you go home and blindly follow your father’s rule.”

Macall stopped, his expression hardening. “What should I do, then?” he practically spat out the words. “Dress up in a costume and run around pretending to be some sort of hero? Even if I’d really just be terrorizing innocents?”

The world just about dropped away under Taye’s feet. Words – any words – scattered. But he couldn’t know. With effort, she caught some and forced herself to speak. “I thought you said Saorsa saved your life.”

Macall stared at her for a long, silent moment – but the expression on his face said enough. “Fine,” he said finally, quiet. Too quiet. “Keep your secrets. Just – next time, don’t wear the necklace I gave you. You could choke.”

He turned and walked out of the arena, the slam of the door echoing behind him.

Taye’s knees threatened mutiny as she stared at the space where he had been. Her hand drifted up to thumb the tiny silver locket hanging from her neck, her parents’ and sister’s names engraved on it.

“It’s you,” Macall had said. Realizing she was Saorsa. Realizing *Taye* was Saorsa.

It’s you.

9. Interim

A small figure skipped down the darkened streets, bare feet silent against the cobblestones. Her silhouette showed a girl of twelve or thirteen, knotted hair and clothes that didn't quite fit right. If it hadn't been so dark, passersby would have seen a spark of fire in her eye, bright against her pale skin and dark hair. As it was, there weren't even any passersby – just a few lone drunks stumbling from one pub to the next.

The young girl was quick on her feet – darting around the drunks into the swinging pub doors. Scurrying around the legs of other patrons like a mouse, hands slipping in and out of pockets with the ease of one long practiced in theft. She crept up the street in this way – running in and out of pubs in minutes, methodical and precise. The moon, bright and full of secrets, was the only one to see her. It tucked her secrets away as well.

The girl stopped, coins jingling quietly in a pocket muffled by a cloth, to pat a dog lying at the mouth of an alleyway. The dog, smelling the stench of beer and the warmth of stew that trailed after the girl, stood on its three good legs and nosed at her. She giggled and produced a small piece of bread from another pocket – of which her cloak, the only item of clothing she owned that wasn't ill-fitted or dirty, had many. The dog inhaled it as she scratched his head.

“Tha's her!” a slurred cry sounded from behind her.

She whirled, the dog slipping away down the alley.

“She's the one what stole my money!”

If it had been a pack of drunks, it wouldn't have mattered. She would have been able to outrun them with ease, confounding them with a mere turn of a corner. If it had been a pub

owner, it wouldn't have mattered. She would have been able to lose him, too, climbing some trellis or drainpipe to a rooftop, the way her sister had taught her.

Unfortunately, it was neither.

A man, steady on his feet for his slurred voice, was pointing in her direction. Next to him stood not one, not two, but three city guards, their dark uniforms camouflaging them against the nightscape.

The young girl took off, feet carrying her down street after street, bare skin cracking and bleeding as she slipped on loose stones. Her cloak caught on a doorknob and she slipped free, pained to leave it but not daring to look back. The city blurred around her.

All too soon, the chase came to an end. The girl, rounding a corner, ran straight into one of the guards who had broken off from the group. He caught her in his arms. Her twelve or thirteen years of growth hadn't afforded her enough strength to break free, though she tried. It was a matter of moments before the other two guards arrived.

They dragged her, kicking and biting and yelling and all, to the castle dungeons, and the last thing she heard before being plunged into total silence was the punishing slam of the iron door as it swung shut behind her.

10. The Last Performance

A week later, Taye could not control her heart as she followed the rest of Corracha into the performance arena. She hadn't heard one word from Macall all week – and hadn't been brave enough to seek him out at the palace. For all she knew, he'd gone straight to his father and told him everything.

Don't be stupid. If he'd done that, Taye would be in the dungeons right now – or worse. Not walking into the king's own arena, about to give a performance for another inane celebration he'd declared.

She tried to push all thoughts of Macall from her mind, but her traitorous heart kept climbing up her throat. Reminding her.

She wasn't ashamed to be Saorsa – though she hadn't dared don the guise after her fight with Macall. She wasn't ashamed that she hadn't told Macall, either. He spent half his time trailing his father around, nodding along with everything the man said. Of course she wouldn't have told him. But he had found out anyway, and now she had to deal with the loss of her only friend.

She watched from the sidelines as the king's scribe strode into the arena and announced Corrach. She watched, but did not really see, as Adamina danced through flames, as Hamish sang a tale of grandeur, or love lost, or both, as the troupe moved through perfectly practiced routines one after the other, to the shouts and cheers of the audience. She looked for Macall but did not see him.

Finally, it was her turn. The final act tonight. She had prepared this routine, had done it a thousand times, but it was still a difficult one. She needed to focus. Rolling her neck and jumping lightly on her feet a few times, she took a deep breath and strode into the arena.

She grabbed the silks, waving them theatrically a few times as Hamish followed her onto the arena. She didn't usually do her routines to music, but the king had requested something special for tonight's celebration. Taye didn't even know what they were celebrating.

"You all right?" Hamish whispered to her, brushing a comforting hand over her shoulder.

Taye nodded. Hamish flashed her a grin, and brought his pipes to his lips.

As he began to play, Taye climbed up the silks. The moment her feet left the ground, the moment her body fell into the familiar rhythm of the dance, she all but forgot Macall. She moved through move after move in time with the music. A sweet tune, slowly increasing in pace as it told a story, Taye had always liked to imagine, of two lovers courting. She flowed with the silks, wrapping, unwrapping, re-wrapping, muscles moving of their own accord as she flew. She dove into a drop, the silks catching her by her ankles, grabbing the tail end and arching her back into a likeness to a scorpion. Like those found in Azar. Then, hauling herself upright with a sweep of her arms, she continued.

She continued her performance like that, lost in Hamish's song and the movements of her dance, relishing the air between her and the ground and the feeling of flowing with the silks as though they were an extension of herself, until she caught a flash of color out of the corner of her eye.

Macall.

She had no way of knowing it was him – the movement had just been a blur – but any excuse and her mind was immediately pulled back to that moment, a week ago, in the training arena.

It's you.

She shook her head, swimming between the two strands of silk and wrapping it around her waist as she prepared for her next, and most complicated, move. She would drop again, body parallel to the ground as she spun, arms outstretched like the spoke of a wagon wheel. The silks would catch her just before the ground. The audience would cheer, she would untangle herself from the silks, slipping to the ground and giving a small bow with Hamish before the two of them walked off the arena and she could return to her room and shut her door to the world.

She finished preparing the move, grabbed the silks loosely in one hand as she gestured to the audience, took a deep breath, and let go just as Hamish hit the loudest note in his song.

She fell, spinning, ground and sky colliding as she lost all sense of direction, lost entirely in the move and in the feeling of flying. She grinned as the audience breathed in a collective gasp.

The silks didn't catch her. Not like they should have.

Instead, she hit the ground. Hard.

Her leg trapped underneath her, breaking her fall.

Breaking. She heard the snap, but didn't register anything aside from blinding pain.

A blur of people, running toward her. Running... past her?

More people, running toward her. Hamish. Adamina. Corrach. Several soldiers.

Not Macall.

The silks hadn't caught her.

Her leg – oh gods, her leg.

Someone was talking to her – she recognized the king's physician, fetched from the stands. She tried to answer him, but the world was going all funny around her. It was hard to see things. It was dark – where had the sun gone? Where –

Nothing.

11. Aftermath

And then, all of a sudden, there was light behind her eyelids. She blinked her eyes open, trying to unblur the room around her. She shifted, blankets around her – for she was in a bed, her

bed, in her room – falling away. Her head ached, but that was forgotten the moment she laid eyes on her leg.

Splinted and wrapped in bandages. Immovable.

She tried to sit up, but the room wobbled around her and she paused, arms propped behind her as she tried to yank the room straight. It didn't cooperate.

This could not be happening. This could *not* be happening.

She felt the beginnings of panic lodge in her throat. She didn't know how badly she'd broken her leg, what if it never healed properly? She wouldn't be able to practice her acrobatics for months. She wouldn't be able to go out as Saorsa. How bad was it? She needed to know how badly it was broken.

The door to the room creaked open and Hamish popped his head in.

"I thought I heard movement," he said, easing his way into the room. "How are you feeling?"

"What's wrong with my leg?" Taye asked.

Hamish sat in the chair that had been placed beside her bed, a small smile on his lips as he met her eyes. "Here," he said, reaching for a pitcher of water on the floor next to her bed. "Drink this." As she drank, he explained. "When you fell from the silks, you hit your head pretty badly. You kept waking up and passing back out. The physician said you should be okay with plenty of rest. And your leg-" he glanced at it, eyes tightening. She wondered what he was thinking. "When you fell, you landed on it. Broke it clean through. The physician set it and splinted it best he could, from what I understood. And it'll heal, he said. But not quickly. Taye. I'm so sorry. I should have caught you-"

Taye shook her head. Tears tried to force their way from her eyes, but she gritted her teeth and held them back. Still, one escaped. “I don’t – I don’t know what happened. I wrapped right, I-”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Hamish said immediately, his calloused and wrinkled hand coming to rest over Taye’s own. “The king’s guards caught someone fleeing the arena, and she admitted to sabotaging your silks.”

“What? Why?” Taye’s heart flew up into her throat again, a location it had become all too comfortable in these past few days.

Hamish shook his head. “Didn’t say.”

Sabotaged. Had it been the king, or Macall? Because of Saorsa? But it couldn’t have been. She would be dead, or imprisoned. Not in her bed, having been treated by the king’s physician.

Some girl had sabotaged her – but why? Taye found that she didn’t care. Her fists curled at her sides, the one under Hamish’s hand yanking away as anger began to seep into her. The girl that had done this – the king’s guards would make sure she paid dearly for her mistake. Attacking a royal entertainer was all but an act of treason.

“Sleep,” Hamish said, rising, noticing her shift in emotion and deducing that his presence was no longer needed. “I’m sorry, Taye.”

Taye watched the door after he left. She didn’t need his apologies, or his sympathy. She didn’t need him – or anyone else – to look on her in pity, to see a weakling unable to get out of bed. She didn’t need anyone, period – and this injury was not about to change that.

Throughout the week, the various members of Corrachá came to check on her. Well-wishing citizens who'd heard about the accident or been in the audience left small tokens on the doorstep. The physician changed her bandages.

Taye ignored all of them.

She could see the pity in their eyes. She could tell from the easy way that they breezed over trite phrases of "you'll get better soon!" that they didn't understand. She could see all of that, and she wanted no part of it.

She wanted to talk to Macall. But the moment she had the thought, she stopped it. She didn't want anything to do with him. Not after he'd stormed off, not after thinking of him had distracted her during her performance, not after he hadn't come to visit her or even send word to see if she was okay. No, she didn't want to talk to the prince.

She was able to hobble across her room if she was careful. But no one would let her leave. Adamina seemed to have posted a guard outside her door, because every time she opened it and tried to make for the stairs, someone would come running and usher her back to bed. It was all Taye could do not to slap them away.

Finally, she could not take the patronizing any longer. She snapped at Adamina, who was leaving her a tray of lunch, to get out.

Adamina whirled on Taye. "You're welcome," she said, gesturing to the food. "You know, Taye, we're all doing everything we can to make sure you're okay. You're a part of our family, and we love you. But you make it really hard when you act like this – like you don't care about any of this. Watching you fall from the silks – we were worried about you." She opened the door, turning back as she left. "So maybe you could be a little bit more thankful."

Taye opened her mouth to respond, but Adamina was gone.

Shame crept toward Taye's heart, but a flood of anger drowned it out. How dare Adamina make her feel bad about this. How did she not understand that losing her silks, losing Saorsa, was like losing herself? It wasn't just some injury, and Taye was not about to feel bad because they couldn't understand. That wasn't her fault.

The anger seized hold of Taye's heart, squeezing it, its vicelike grip settling so that Taye could feel it every time she drew a breath. It comforted her.

She hobbled over to the window, staring out at the street below. Her head throbbed, and her leg sent sharp pricks of pain up her spine, begging her to sit down, but she ignored both of them. It was so easy to ignore them.

It was so easy to ignore a lot of things, she decided, settling into her anger like a warm blanket.

The king's physician brought her a strange contraption. A pair of long wooden poles, constructed of various beams that formed a triangle at the top which tapered into a point. They were supposed to help her walk.

It took her a day to figure out how to use them properly, and another day to get a rhythm down so that she wasn't tripping over her own feet every few moments. In three days, the spot under her arms where the poles rested was sore and red. In five days, it had stopped bothering her.

She hated advertising her injury to the world in such an obvious fashion – but at least she could go downstairs now. Her first stop had been the training arena, where she'd tried to maneuver the silks so that she could use them with one foot – until Hamish had walked in on her

and threatened to tell Adamina if she didn't stop. He was just worried for her safety, she knew that, but it didn't change the fact that she spat a curse at him and stalked away.

She'd visited her silks a few times since then, but she couldn't stand being near them and not being able to climb up into them. It stoked her anger, too, which she carried around with her always now – her leg wasn't healing fast enough, no matter how much she willed it to. Staring at the silks only reminded her of that. Worse, if she stared too long, the world around her began to cave in, the air seeming to go in and out of her lungs without doing anything, and she would have to leave before her knees got too shaky to support her. Well, knee.

It was as if her body no longer belonged to her.

She tried to be okay. She tried to bite her tongue, to dam up the spiteful words that clung to her lips and hovered ready, itching to pounce on the slightest provocation. But she couldn't be weak.

"Look who's joining us," Fenella said one evening a couple weeks after the fall. Every head looked up from the dinner table in unison.

Taye had been taking suppers in her room, unwilling to make conversation with even her fellow Corracha. Tonight, though, she'd had enough of staring at the same four walls for hours on end.

"Ada, I think I'm seeing things," Hamish said, winking at Taye as she made her way on her poles to the table.

Adamina was silent as she watched Taye carefully lower herself into an empty seat, brushing off an offer of help from the Corracha seated next to her. She rested her poles against the table and reached for the food laid out on the table. She was conscious of Adamina's eyes on

her, but refused to meet her gaze. She was still angry about their earlier conversation, and she could tell Adamina was still upset with her.

“Smells good,” she said into the silence when no one started talking.

After that, things went back to normal. Well, more normal. Everyone started talking again, and Taye listened to their conversation, smiling and even laughing once, but all the while having to bite back feelings of bitterness. Someone offered her a drink, and the smell of the alcohol and its promise of easing the storm inside her all but propelled her hand to the mug, but she managed to decline.

And then there was a knock on the door. Adamina narrowed her eyes and stood up to answer it. Corrachá rarely got visitors.

She opened the door, and there stood Macall, hair fluffed from the windy night.

Whatever Taye had expected to feel when she saw Macall again, it wasn't the relief that now ran through her. It was short-lived, though, as she reminded herself of the two weeks that had passed without a single word from him.

His eyes found hers, and he made to cross the threshold, but Adamina stepped in front of him. She looked back at Taye, raising her eyebrows in a silent question.

Taye forgot to respond for a moment. Adamina, who had been so angry with Taye that Taye had wondered if she'd ever be forgiven, had just blocked the crown prince from entering Corrachá. Macall wasn't fazed – he rarely was when it came to the luxuries afforded his title – but the gesture alone was still something.

Remembering herself, she gave Adamina a quick, tight nod, and she stepped away to let Macall pass. He stood awkwardly near the table as Taye returned her attention to the food before her.

“Can we speak?” he asked her after a moment.

“After I eat,” she said, glancing toward him and away again.

The table was once again silent. “Would you like something to eat?” Hamish asked after a moment.

Macall smiled at him and shook his head. “No, but thank you. Please, don’t let my presence interrupt your dinner.”

Taye finished her meal and excused herself from the table, having decided how she was going to approach the situation. She propped herself up on her poles, noting with satisfaction the concern that Macall tried to hide as he stared at them.

“You wanted to speak with me, your Highness?”

Macall blinked at her tone, polite and distant. “Yes,” he said. “Alone?”

“Will you join me in my room, then, if you don’t deem it inappropriate?”

Macall pursed his lips, then nodded, and followed her up the stairs.

“What are you doing?” he said the second the door closed behind them and they were alone.

“I’m sorry, sire, what do you mean?”

“Why are you talking to me like – like you’re a commoner?”

Taye’s legs were tired from all the moving around she’d done in the past few hours, but she refused to sit. Instead, she moved around Macall so that she was near the window. And then she caught herself. She always looked to windows as escape routes – climbing out of second or third story windows was easy for someone who spent half her time dangling off the ground. Had been, anyway. Now it wouldn’t do her any good, and she’d just moved herself away from the

only practical escape route left – the door. Because she didn't know why Macall had come here. For all she knew, there could be guardsmen waiting in the street below to take her away.

“Am I not your subject? Do you not rule me?” she asked, unable to stop some anger from creeping into the voice she had tried so hard to keep indifferent.

“Taye, enough. Please.”

And there it was. The snap. Taye no longer had a leash on her anger. “What do you want, Macall? Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see if you were okay.”

“I'm fine. Obviously. I've had two weeks to heal.”

Macall grimaced. “I'm sorry, I should have come sooner, but-”

“Don't make excuses. Don't. I can't deal with any more people telling me why I shouldn't feel the way I do.” The words slipped out, but Taye didn't regret them. It felt good to get it off her chest, and Macall – Macall, who had dropped a bomb on her and then disappeared, leaving her to wonder at her fate, Macall who had witnessed her fall and not felt enough of their friendship left to see if she was alive – Macall was the perfect target.

Except he seemed to have grown a backbone in the two weeks they hadn't seen each other. “*Excuses?*” his anger was a caliber Taye had never seen before. “I don't get to make *excuses?* You're Saorsa, Taye, and you didn't tell me! And I'm the crown prince of Monadh! Did you expect me to just be okay with your secret identity? Did you expect me to forget that my father has signed your death warrant, that the whole godsdamned kingdom is your enemy? *My* whole kingdom. How did you expect me to react? Because I thought I was doing okay even showing my face here again, never mind the fact I didn't come the second you got hurt because,

I'm sorry, but finding out your best friend is also the crown's number one enemy is not something you just *get over*."

Words failed Taye. She stared at him, and he stared back, eyes burning. The silence stretched, Taye battling equal feelings of guilt and resentment at him for making her feel that way. Finally, she sat on her bed, resting her poles next to her.

"I'm not going to apologize for being Saorsa," she began, and saw the flame reignite in Macall's eyes, so she continued. "But I'm sorry I didn't tell you, and I'm sorry I put you in that position."

Macall breathed deeply, then slowly walked over and sat next to her on the bed. "I understand," he said. "I get why you want to be her. And I know that nothing I say is going to convince you to stop being her. I just – you put me in a really difficult place, and I don't know how to handle it yet."

"Did you tell your father?" It was a blunt question, but she had to know.

Macall shook his head. "Of course not. That's the last thing I would do."

Taye breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm still annoyed you never came to see if I was okay," she said, elbowing him. She didn't know if they were on friendly enough terms yet to start poking fun at each other again, and she waited with a stilled heart for his response.

Macall elbowed her right back. "Are you?" he asked. "Okay?"

Taye nodded. "It doesn't hurt hardly at all anymore, so that's something."

Macall's mouth was a thin line as he looked at her splinted leg. "When I heard what happened, I – well, I had another attack. A bad one. Thank the gods you'd taught my servants how to help me."

"Wait," Taye stopped him. "you weren't there?"

“No,” Macall shook his head. “I couldn’t.”

“But I thought-” she pictured again that flash of color in her mind, the one she had thought had been Macall. “Never mind.”

They talked for a while longer, but Taye could tell that Macall was holding back. He had trouble meeting her gaze, and he shifted uncomfortably any time they neared the subject of Saorsa. Taye tried not to blame him, but she couldn’t help feeling frustrated. He was like a brother to her – he should understand why Saorsa was necessary. For her. For the kingdom. She knew he didn’t agree with his father, that when one day he took his place on the throne his kingdom would be one of kindness and fairness, not tyranny and persecution. So when he looked at her like – like she wasn’t an enemy, not exactly, but not a friend either – something hardened in her stomach.

After Macall left, Taye spent a long time sitting on her bed, staring at her leg. Macall had seen her as a threat, and that’s why he had avoided her. But now that she was crippled, now that her strength had been taken from her, he visited. Her throat clogged with frustration. She was not weak, she was not –

She jumped out of bed, bending down to slide out the chest containing Saorsa’s clothes. With some difficulty, she pulled them on. She grabbed her poles and stormed her way downstairs as best she could. To her surprise, Macall was still there. He was seated at the table with Adamina, and the two of them spoke in low voices. They looked at her in surprise when she crossed the kitchen. Talking about her, most likely.

She ignored them, reaching the door and striding out into the night.

It was a bright night, the full moon casting shadows even in the dark. She stuck to the sides of buildings, careful on the uneven cobbles to not trip up on her poles. She followed the winding streets out toward the small peninsula, where a small mansion sat on the cliffs overlooking the harbor below. A single torchlight flickered in an upstairs window, but the rest of the house was dark and silent.

She'd never finished her mission the night she'd run into Macall. Now she was.

She hobbled closer to the house, perched at the end of a street full of small, empty stalls. The man who owned the house was a young merchant. He'd inherited his wealth from his merchant father before him, and the entire street leading up to his house sold only his wares. He was also a vocal, financial supporter of the king's anti-immigration rule.

The front door was locked. No matter. Taye's original plan had been to scale the building, enter through a second-story window, and locate his wealth from there. Instead, she slipped a set of lock picks from a hidden pocket in her trousers and fiddle with the door for a moment before it clicked open. She slipped inside.

The inside was just as quiet as the outside. She made quick work of searching the first floor, despite her leg, finding no hidden rooms or chests of gold. Onto the second, then.

The stairs were a bit more difficult to navigate, and Taye's pole clacked against the wood on one of the last steps. She froze, holding her breath, but there were no sounds of stirring. She tried to map the room she'd seen with the torchlight, so that she could avoid it.

The second floor was just as devoid of heaps of gold as the first. Not that she'd expected his money to be out in the open – but she had expected to at least find it. She'd checked every room but the one with light filtering under the crack, even walking in on the slumbering figure of who she assumed must be the merchant's wife.

She had to check the last room.

She crept down the hall, adjusting Saorsa's mask and making quick note of all the quickest points of escape. The door wasn't closed tight, and she laid a palm on it, gently pushing it open to peek inside.

A young man, not much older than herself, sat hunched over a desk, scribbling furiously at a paper. The merchant, she assumed. It was a bare room, no ornamentation save for the plain rug covering most of the floor. And there, in the corner of the room, a small pile of locked chests.

She swore silently. There was no way she was getting to that while the merchant was still in the room, and he didn't look likely to leave any time soon. She ran over her options, deciding that now that she knew where the money was, it would be a simple matter to return another day and steal it.

Annoyed, she turned and made her way back to the stairs. Almost there, her pole got stuck on the corner of an upturned rug. She tripped, falling forward and catching herself with her hands. Her poles clattered noisily to the ground.

A scraping of wood on wood told her that the merchant had stood abruptly from his desk.

She grabbed for her poles, yanking herself to her feet and all but flinging herself down the stairs. It wasn't fast enough, though, and as she reached the bottom she heard a shout. She risked a look back – stupid, she knew it was stupid – and saw the merchant charging down the stairs after her.

“Hey!” he yelled, as she raced for the door. “Stop!”

She made it to the door, but fumbled with the knob. Too long, it was taking too long –

Hands grabbed her shoulders and threw her against the wall, her face smashed against the stone. Her poles clattered to the ground.

The merchant pinned her in place, hands pressing into her shoulders. She tried to crane her neck, to twist around to face him, but he held her there.

“Don’t move,” he panted. “What are you doing here?”

Taye didn’t answer. She had worked one of the knives hidden in her sleeves out into her hand. She swung blindly behind her. The merchant cursed and leaped backward, freeing her.

She didn’t hesitate. She threw the door open and slipped outside. She ran as fast as she could, hobbling on her broken leg because she’d left the poles behind. She didn’t hear any sounds of pursuit, but she didn’t dare stop until she was blocks away. Ducking down a narrow alley, she collapsed against the wall.

She’d failed. She hadn’t even been able to steal a pile of lousy money. And she’d nearly been discovered in the process. Fighting against that merchant – a boy who had probably never seen a day’s combat in his life – had taken all of her strength.

Macall had been right not to be afraid of her. She was weak. If she couldn’t even do this simple, stupid mission on her own – but then again, everyone in Corrachá thought she couldn’t even go down the stairs on her own.

She stared at her leg, the pain more acute than it had been in a while. She was useless without it. It had robbed her of more than her strength – it had robbed her of her independence.

She couldn’t take care of herself. Macall had seen that, and had swooped in, ever the savior of the weak. Gods, no. Without her leg, without her silks, without Saorsa – she was just another woman, beholden to the whims of men. The realization stole the breath from her and squeezed her heart with something more than anger, now. With fear.

She stared at her leg, and stared and stared, the fear bruising her heart and tightening her muscles until she couldn't move. How easily that boy had been able to hold her. How difficult it had been to just *run away*. Without her leg, she was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

13. Dreams

Somehow she made it back to Corracha. Somehow she made herself knock on Adamina's door, to warn her that she'd left her poles at the merchant's house. Somehow, she managed to survive Adamina's tirade, to stay up while Adamina herself went back to the house to retrieve the poles and threaten the merchant into silence.

Somehow, she finally slipped into sleep.

The next morning, getting out of bed was an insurmountable task. Taye pulled the blanket up to her neck, staring at her wall and trying to ignore the pulsing pain in her leg. She didn't go downstairs for breakfast, and no one brought her any. She didn't even leave her bed until midday, and that was only to go stand by her window, picking up the poles that Adamina had thrown through her door without a word in the early morning.

She watched the passersby on the street below without really seeing them. The events of last night kept replaying her head. Her tumble at the top of the stairs. Her inability to move quicker than a soft merchant boy. Her narrow escape out the front door, straining her leg and probably setting herself weeks back in the healing process as a result.

She wanted to scream, to cry, to punch something, to physically force her bones back into place. She wanted the splint and bandages gone, and her fingers curled with the effort of holding herself back. She couldn't even look at it anymore. Not without feeling the breath catch in her

lungs and her head grow heavy with the weight of all her thoughts. She was trapped – trapped inside of her own body, and she couldn't do a damned thing about it.

More than anything she wanted to be on her silks. There she could escape herself, there she could be strong and in control.

Here... she squeezed her eyes closed and tried to block out her thoughts.

She didn't leave her room all day, and no one came to see her, either. She guessed they'd finally gotten the message that she wanted to be left alone.

She hadn't meant to be this alone.

The anger was still there, but it was colder, aimed as much at herself now as at anyone else. She should've been better – better at being Saorsa, better at dealing with her injury, better at everything.

Night fell, finally, and Taye burrowed back underneath her blanket. Sleep was hard to come by, and she laid awake for hours, mind pinwheeling faster than any drop from the silks.

When sleep did find her, in the early hours of the morning, she dreamed of her parents, and of her sister. She dreamed of that moment, at home, watching with her sister from the window as their parents were attacked by strangers. In the dream, the strangers all had the king's face. Her mom, olive skin and auburn hair, trying to shield her fair-skinned, white-haired father. Being tossed aside. Her dad running toward her and being hit by the first stone. They were left bleeding in the streets for a long while after. City guardsmen jeered as they walked by.

She dreamed, too, of her sister. So small, barely six years old. Taye had been stupid, so stupid to trust that man, the one who had promised them food, and shelter, and family. She screamed and screamed as her sister, with her dark hair and white skin, was loaded onto that caravan. She screamed and ran after the man as he closed the carriage's door, pummeling him

with her fists even as another man hauled her away. As her sister disappeared in a trail of dust. That man, too, had the king's face.

When she woke, it was with the words "I'm sorry" already spilling from her lips.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm

A throat cleared, and she looked up to see Macall standing in her doorway.

14. Remedy

"Taye," he said by way of greeting, and she didn't like the seriousness with which he said it.

"Morning, Macall, please come in and make yourself at home." She rolled her eyes at him, tucking away the raw emotions of the moment before.

"Get up and get dressed. I need to talk to you." Macall looked at her for a moment, expression unreadable, then closed the door, leaving her alone.

"Okay," Taye muttered. "Sure. Will do, your Majesty." She blinked, trying to shake the sleep and the nightmares from her eyes. Slowly, leg protesting with every step, she dressed herself.

Opening her door several minutes later, she found Macall leaning against the wall outside. "What," she said, annoyed.

"Come with me," he answered, starting down the hallway and then waiting at the top of the stairs until she begrudgingly followed.

They made it to the bottom of the stairs, and Macall stopped, turning to her.

"Adamina spoke with me the other night," he said. Taye's already foul mood grew even darker. "Wait," he said, sensing her distrust. "Hear me out before you start yelling." He waited,

and she bit her tongue, glaring at him. This was not going to be good, whatever it was. “She’s worried about you, Taye. She’s worried you’re not going to... get over your injury.”

“The physician said it would heal eventually.”

“No. She meant... Um, she meant emotionally.” Here Macall started to fumble for words. He ran a hand through his hair, his nervous tic. Taye narrowed her eyes, but didn’t speak. “So, she asked me to help. She asked me to talk to you, but I thought – well, I thought maybe it would be better if you got to talk to some other women instead.”

“What?” Taye was finally able to speak.

Macall acted like he hadn’t heard her. “So – I talked to some of the members of Corracha, and some of the palace staff. They’re here.”

“For me. To talk to.” Taye was still trying to process what was happening.

Macall opened the door to their left, the door to the sitting room they so rarely used because they were always around the kitchen table. Five women were gathered, speaking quietly to each other. They all fell silent when Macall opened the door.

He walked in, grabbing Taye by the hand and pulling her after him. She had no choice but to follow, or be pulled off balance of her poles. She looked around the room, noting to her surprise that Adamina and Fenella were both among the women gathered.

She felt their eyes on her like individual pinpricks of fire. Her skin tingled, warming as her anger bubbled to life. How dare Macall make presumptions on her behalf, how dare he assume that she needed help, that he knew what she needed. How dare he – actually, since he was standing right there, she could tell him this to his face.

She whirled on him. “Are you kidding me?” she yelled. “How dare you presume to know what I need.”

Macall struggled for words. “Taye, I just wanted you to be able to talk to someone. Not me, someone more-”

“More what?” she latched onto his words. “More like me? More weak? More easily forgotten and controlled by men? Or,” she changed directions, noting the uncomfortableness written into his stance. “Did you just want to pawn me off because you’re still afraid of me?”

“Taye-” that was Adamina, rising from her chair.

Taye ignored her. “You’re afraid of me still, aren’t you? Of the fact that I killed a man in front of you and you can barely even hold a sword.”

Macall’s face drained of color. Taye felt the words, felt the viciousness of them, the way they hung in the air, unable to be taken back. She felt the unfairness of them, and she faltered for a moment, but refused to back down.

“Taye,” Macall said finally. His voice was quiet, and his eyes shone, but his tone was firm. Firm, not angry. Not unkind. “Taye, please. I don’t want to lose my best friend.” And that was what nearly broke Taye. That Macall would stand there and take her insults, insults meant to hurt him the worst she could, and he would not flinch. That he would still be trying to help her, despite everything. That he would still call her his best friend –

She turned and fled the room, then fled the house, still unable to rid herself of his kindness.

Adamina found her an hour later, sitting by the silks in the training arena. She settled next to her in the sand, bringing her knees to her chest and folding her hands loosely over them. They sat in silence for several moments.

“I’m sorry,” Taye said finally. “I – he – Macall-” she stopped, not knowing what she would have said next.

“It’s okay to be angry,” Adamina said. “It’s okay to be afraid, too. I would be if I were in your place.”

“But I can’t stop,” Taye said before she could stop herself.

Adamina nodded. “Look, Taye. I’m not here to coddle you. I never have been. You can go see Hamish if that’s what you need,” she said it with a smile, and Taye huffed a laugh. “Can I tell you what your problem is?” She didn’t wait for Taye to respond. “Doesn’t matter. I’m going to tell you anyway. Your problem is that you think the whole world is against you, and you need to prove yourself. Stop me if I get any of this wrong-” she was sitting up straight now, looking Taye in the eyes even as Taye tried to avoid her gaze. “You think that being a woman means being weak, and you’re fighting that with every fiber of your being.”

“How is that a bad thing?” Taye asked.

“Your strength isn’t the problem. It’s the fact that you think it’s all that defines you. It’s the fact that you think physical strength is the only type of strength, and that if you’re not physically strong, as a woman, you must be a lesser being.”

“What do you want me to say?” Taye asked, when it was clear that Adamina wasn’t going to continue. “I was a silk acrobat, and I was Saorsa, and both of those things have been taken from me. I have nothing left.”

Adamina shook her head. “Not nothing. That’s what I’m trying to say, if you’d stop being so stubborn for one second. Look, do you think I’m weak, because I’m a woman who doesn’t constantly need to define herself against the men around her? Because I don’t have the same muscles they do?”

Taye didn't answer. Truth be told, even though she'd always respected Adamina's authority, she had wondered why the woman never trained the same way Taye did, why she was content to let men be stronger than her.

"When I was ten," Adamina began. "my home burned to the ground in a fire. My mother and I weren't there – we were visiting her father – but my father and my two older siblings were there. My mother and I lost everything. We had no money, and no shelter, and suddenly no one to provide for us. So we moved here, to Bruadar. And we took any job we could find. I spent three years working as a maid for a man so cruel he would whip me for choosing the wrong nightshirt."

"You should have stood up to him."

"And what? Lose my job? Lose my mother and I's only means of survival? No. I kept my head down, and I took his whippings, and my mother and I didn't have to die on the streets. And later, when I discovered Corracha and I discovered fire dancing, I saw it as a way to take control of the thing that had once destroyed me.

"Tell me," Adamina said, standing and looking down at Taye. "That that is not a form of strength."

Taye didn't look at her – she couldn't. She hadn't known any of this about Adamina, despite having lived with the woman for years. She hated that she felt the truth in what Adamina was saying, so she did not acknowledge it.

"All of those women are strong, Taye. And they will gladly tell you their stories, if you are willing to listen."

But Taye could not. Not yet. So Adamina left her there, sitting by herself in an empty arena, drawing aimless circles in the sand.

15. Interim – Part 2

The dungeon was a lonely place, dark and damp and smelling of must, but the young girl had been worse places. At least the door was not of solid wood, like so many rooms she had been locked in before. At least it was a row of iron bars, so that she could watch as the guards made their rounds, as prisoners were carted to and from, and she could stave off her boredom.

She could not stave off her thoughts, though. No matter how hard she tried. The young girl felt herself becoming more and more trapped with every passing hour. She did not know when the king would be back to schedule her death, but surely he would. He had promised her nothing less, after all.

It wasn't the thought of her death, though, that left her in a spiraling panic. It was that moment, replayed over and over in her mind without pause. The girl on her silks. So beautiful. It was watching from the stands, hardly daring to breathe. Waiting. Waiting until she came crashing down, then running – straight into the arms of the waiting guards.

That moment she hit the ground – played out over and over and over – how her leg bent, how her body went still.

The king had promised her a quick death, and the girl had wanted it. Had wanted to stop seeing that moment.

But the longer she waited, alone, in that damp dungeon, the less she wanted to die.

The waiting.

The girl's fall.

The young girl's own death.

Waiting. Falling. Dying. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Her thoughts began spiraling so tightly that they cinched across her throat, and she couldn't breathe. Her vision narrowed, her heart pumping panic rather than blood. Somewhere, distantly, she heard the door to the dungeons bang open, but she didn't care.

This could not be happening. Not again, not here, not now. Her hands shook, air filled her lungs but did not replenish them. A sob escaped her lips. The walls began to close in around her mind, trapping her there.

No. She found a hole in the wall, slipped through, forced her lips open to rasp words that only she could hear. A poem. The words coming easily to her lips despite the foreign nature of their sounds. The young girl had heard this poem recited many times by her people, had recited it herself more times than she could count.

Slowly, the panic began to fade. Slowly, the walls lifted and she came back to herself. Slowly.

The young girl's breathing came in ragged gasps, but she could feel the air filling her lungs, and it was working. As her vision widened again, as the dungeon returned around her, she remembered the slam of the door and looked up.

To see the crown prince staring at her, mouth hanging open.

"Where – where did you learn that poem?" he asked.

The young girl blinked at him, brushing a strand of dark hair out of her eye.

The prince drew closer to the door of her prison, his hands gripping the metal bars.

"Where?" he demanded, more forcefully this time.

"My sister," the young girl rasped, voice still painful with disuse.

"She used to recite it to you, when you had attacks. Because of your anxious heart."

The girl nodded. How could the prince know this? She studied him, curious, wondering at the storm of emotions stealing across his face. He seemed unable to form proper words, opening and closing his mouth like a fish gasping for water. She fought the urge to draw closer.

“Why did you – why did you sabotage her?” he asked finally.

The word made the girl flinch, brought the scene back to her mind. She shoved it aside, successful for a moment. Did the prince really not know? Not know what his own father had come to her for? What he had threatened, what he had promised? No – he didn’t. The look on his face told her that. So she told him, this strange prince with his kind eyes and confused face. She told him everything.

And he listened, eyes growing wider with every word. He listened, and he promised to be back.

And he was. Two nights later. With a set of keys clanging softly in his hand.

16. Rescue

Taye had let Adamina talk her into sitting with Fenella. Only Fenella, because she knew her. She wasn’t ready to talk with the palace women yet, to reveal herself to them. And so she’d spent the past two days speaking with Adamina and Fenella, learning about their histories and wondering how there was so much about these two women she had never known.

She kept pulling out her Saorsa costume and staring at it. Considering. Itching to put it on. Remembering the merchant boy’s hands on her shoulders. Putting it away. Taking it out again a little while later.

She was staring at it, in fact, when she heard a loud pounding on the front door below. She set it aside, curious as to who would be here at this late hour. She heard muffled voices but could not make out any words.

Then, footsteps coming up the stairs. And a pounding on her own door.

“Taye!” It was Macall.

Taye got up from her bed, shifting her poles under her arms and crossing to her door.

Macall was not alone, and the figure standing beside him knocked the breath from her lungs.

“Kenna?”

The young girl, with her knotted hair and dirty clothes, nearly knocked Taye over as she tackled her in an embrace. Taye wrapped her arms around the girl, running a hand across her hair, holding her as tightly as she could, poles clattering forgotten to the ground. Her sister – this young girl holding onto her as though she would die if she let go was her sister.

Taye looked up at Macall, tears spilling from her eyes. She had thought her sister dead, or worse. She had thought – she had never thought –

“How?” she managed.

Macall didn’t seem to know how to answer. His expression was torn between a smile and something else – something, if Taye hadn’t thought it impossible, that looked like fear.

And then the bells started. Ringing out across the city, the palace’s warning that something had happened. Was happening. Macall looked toward the sound, his eyes tightening with fear. Kenna released Taye and looked at Macall, the same fear echoed in her eyes. Eyes that Taye had never thought to see again.

But there were the bells.

“What did you do?” Taye asked as Macall ushered them all into her room and closed the door behind them.

“He rescued me,” Kenna answered, and Taye wanted to throw her arms around her sister all over again just from hearing her voice. “The king had me in his dungeons. He-” here Kenna’s eyes found Taye’s splinted leg, and tears filled her eyes. “Taye, I’m so sorry. I – he didn’t give me a choice, he-”

The sight of her sister so upset brought memories flooding back, and Taye grabbed her sister’s hands with both of hers. “It’s okay. Whatever it is, it’s okay.” She looked at Macall.

“Explain. Now.”

“We don’t have time-”

“Explain.”

Macall swallowed. “My father made a deal with her. He – apparently his men caught her pickpocketing in the city. He told her – he told her if she sabotaged your performance, he would grant her a quick death. If not-” Macall shook his head, but he didn’t have to finish. Taye already knew what happened to immigrants who were subjected to the king’s whims. But –

“It was you?” she looked at her sister, who bit her lip as tears filled her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” she buried her head in Taye’s shoulder, and Taye wrapped her arms around her.

“It’s okay. I’m okay, see?” She continued murmuring consolingly to her sister. She glanced over at Macall and he met her eyes, the pain in his own greater than anything she had ever seen there before.

“My father did this,” he whispered hoarsely. “I’m sorry, Taye. If I’d known-”

They were interrupted by shouting in the street below. Macall jumped up and strode over to the window, his face going even paler than it already was. “Soldiers,” he said. “They’re looking for us. I should have – I should have come to you first. Let you make the escape plan. But,” he shook his head.

“But you wanted to prove that you could do it on your own,” Taye finished. She should have been angry. Angry that he’d taken it upon himself to rescue her sister, that he’d brought her to Taye only to have them threatened again. But she couldn’t be angry with her sister, her beautiful, brave, beautifully *alive* sister in her arms. When Macall looked surprised, she gave him a half smile. “I know you better than you think, idiot.”

There was a knock on her door, and Adamina saying, “it’s me,” before pushing it open.

She took in the three people in the room. Macall, by the window. Taye with her arms still around her sister. A smile lit her face briefly, but was quickly replaced with a thin, grave line.

“You need to do something,” she said. “There are soldiers crawling all over the city, looking for her.” She pointed to Kenna.

A thought occurred to Taye at that moment. “Wait,” she said. “Why did the king want to sabotage my performance?”

“He knew,” Kenna whispered. Taye’s blood ran cold. “He knew about – about Corrach’s support of immigrants. He thought if – if-”

“If he took away our best performer, we’d stop,” Adamina finished.

But Macall shook his head. “No,” he said. “I know my father. He wouldn’t stop there. Your injury,” he looked at Taye. “Was just a warning.”

Taye's leg prickled with phantom pain. She looked from Adamina to Macall to Kenna, the warning bells still ringing in the background. "Does he know?" she asked. "That Kenna is my sister?"

"I think he just needed a fall-person," Macall answered.

At that moment, there was a loud pounding on the door below. The blood drained from Adamina's face, and Taye's heart stopped as she heard the soldiers' shouts, demanding to be let in.

Macall was wrong. The king knew.

17. Escape

The knocking continued. If no one answered soon, they were going to break the door down.

"What are we going to do?" Taye looked at Adamina.

"We need to get Kenna away from here."

"I can – if the king knows, I can take her away," Taye said. "We'll run. We'll leave the city."

Macall shook his head. "If you run, my father will think he's won."

Taye cut a glance to Macall. His eyes were hard, especially when he mentioned his father. The man had finally done it – he'd finally managed to turn his own son against him. Under any other circumstances, Taye would have felt triumphant. Now, all she cared about was keeping Kenna away from that man's hands.

The pounding continued. The door wouldn't hold much longer.

“Go to Fenella’s,” Adamina said. “The king won’t think to look there first. I will speak with these soldiers, and I will meet you there.” She turned and left the room.

Taye watched her go. She didn’t doubt Adamina’s ability to speak with the soldiers, but she didn’t think the soldiers were going to do much talking. She sent a quick prayer to the gods for Adamina’s safety, then turned to Macall.

“Are you with us?” she asked.

“Of course,” Macall didn’t hesitate.

Taye grabbed her sister’s hand and they met Macall at the window. Taye shoved it open. Her window, luckily, looked onto a side street. There were no soldiers there.

“Macall, you go down first. Use the trellis. Kenna, you follow him. I will throw my poles down to you and follow. Now!”

Macall swallowed. Taye knew he was remembering their session in the training arena, the one that had ended with him hanging feet above the ground, muscles exhausted. But he clenched his jaw and crawled out the window. Taye watched his progress. He was slow, frustratingly slow, but finally he made it to the bottom.

Kenna slipped out the window next, all the ease and grace that Taye herself felt when she was in the air. Her heart ached as she realized how much her sister had grown in the years since she’d last seen her.

No time to think of that now. Kenna reached the ground and Taye tossed her her poles, then clambered awkwardly out the window, ignoring the pain in her leg as she put weight on it. She had to, never mind if it never healed properly now.

Her progress down the trellis was slow and awkward, and she listened with baited breath, waiting for the moment the soldiers would break into her room above and see them out the window.

Mercifully, it never came. Whatever Adamina was doing, it was working.

She reached the ground and grabbed her poles from Kenna. The three of them took off, Taye in the lead as they wove through the narrow streets. She did not take them the most direct route to Fenella's house. Not because she thought there was anyone following them, but because the streets were flooded with soldiers, and she kept having to backtrack and find other routes.

Finally, finally, they made it to Fenella's house. The door opened before Taye could even knock, and Fenella ushered them inside, darting quick glances out the door behind them before closing it tightly.

"I heard the bells," she said. "And I thought – well, I guess I was right. What's going on?"

So they told her. Fenella looked worried when they mentioned Adamina's staying behind to deal with the soldiers, but she took one look at Kenna and set a pot of boiling water on her hearth. She handed the girl a large chunk of bread as they waited for the tea. And for Adamina.

The bells had stopped tolling – but the soldiers had not left the streets – when Adamina finally arrived. Her eyes were haggard and her dress was torn, but she ignored their questions, merely assuring them that the soldiers had not followed her here. Yet.

"We need to get Kenna out of the city," Macall said. "Otherwise my father will find her."

Adamina nodded.

"We all need to leave, if the king knows about us," Taye said. She refused to let her sister leave again, not unless she was going too.

This time, Adamina shook her head. “No,” she said. “That’s why we have to stay. The king knows about us, but he hasn’t had us arrested. Obviously, he has something planned. Something bigger than us. We can’t abandon our people now.”

Taye hated that she was right. But still, she could not leave Kenna. “I’ll go, then. The rest of you can stay.”

“No,” now it was Macall who spoke. That single word made her want to punch him. Didn’t he see how much this meant to her? “Then my father will have an excuse to persecute Corrach. You have to stay, Taye.”

“She can’t go by herself!” Taye yelled. “She’s only twelve.”

“I can go,” Macall said, and they all looked at him. “It’s time I stood up to my father, I think.”

“Don’t be idiotic,” Taye snapped. “You’re the crown prince of Monadh. You can’t run away. And what if you have to defend yourself or Kenna?” Hurt crept into Macall’s eyes at that, but Taye shook her head. “I’m not trying to insult you, Macall. She’s my sister.” He nodded.

“*She* is standing right here,” Kenna said. Everyone’s head snapped to her.

The young girl set her tea down, face grim but determined. She looked at Taye. “I spent months on my own, travelling back to Bruadar to find you. I can handle myself.”

“Out of the question,” Taye said immediately. “Absolutely not. I’m going with you.”

“No, you’re not,” Kenna said, voice firm, and Taye looked at her in surprise. “I’m not six years old anymore. You don’t have to protect me.”

This was not the young girl that Taye remembered, the girl who had always been attached to Taye’s arm, even before their parents were killed. The girl who had followed in Taye’s every shadow, who Taye had sheltered and loved and never let out of her sight. Until she had.

This girl standing before her now was older. Stronger. Fiercer. Taye's heart ached to think of everything that had made her that way, of everything that she had not been there to protect her from.

"I will not be separated from you again. I just got you back," she said to Kenna.

Kenna took Taye's hands. "And I just got you back. But neither of us will have each other for long if we don't try to stay one step ahead of this monster. You must stay here, and fight, and I must leave, if only to draw his attention elsewhere."

Taye shook her head. "You can't – you can't go alone. Please."

"I'll go with her."

The words came from Fenella.

"What?" Adamina said it quietly, and Fenella looked at her.

"The king won't care if I'm gone. He hardly even knows I exist. I'm not a member of Corrachá. And if anyone asks, you can say I'm visiting my parents in the country."

"Where would we go?" Kenna asked. There was no skepticism in her voice. She was planning.

"To my parents," Fenella avoided Adamina's gaze when she said it. Taye knew that Adamina hated Fenella's parents – and with good reason, if the stories they had told her were anything to go by. Fenella had insisted they were good people, though, and Taye had found she believed her. At least, she trusted her. "That way, if anyone came looking for me, I would not be caught in a lie. It would not be suspicious."

Kenna nodded. "I will go with you."

"Wait!" Taye didn't know what she was going to say, she just knew that she could not let Kenna leave without her, not again, without putting up a fight. "Kenna, please. What if-"

“Taye, please,” and now there were tears in Kenna’s eyes. “Please don’t beg me to stay. Because I won’t be able to say no. Please.”

The words clawed at Taye’s throat, ripping it to shreds as they tried to burst from her lips. But she swallowed, and swallowed, and swallowed them back. Because Kenna was right. They were all right. This was the only plan that made sense. But it meant losing Kenna. Again. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She pulled Kenna into an embrace, burying her face in her sister’s hair.

“You are so strong,” she whispered to her. “And so brave. My beautiful Kenna.”

“I’ll be back,” Kenna promised, her own voice breaking. “I’ll be back,” she repeated, as if trying to convince herself, too.

Soldiers poured into the street. They would have no reason to suspect anything happening in this house, but all the same it worried them.

“We need to go,” Fenella said. “Now.”

She grabbed her cloak from the wall and handed it to Kenna, who draped it over her shoulders and head, obscuring her features. Adamina drew her own cloak off her back and handed it to Fenella. The two of them embraced, speaking in low tones, and Taye turned to Kenna and Macall to give them privacy as they said their farewells.

“We will distract the soldiers,” Taye said. “You and Fenella must hurry.”

“You cannot contact each other,” Macall warned, eyes full of apology. “My father’s spies are notorious. You cannot risk it.”

The two of them nodded.

“Ready?” Fenella walked over and grabbed Kenna’s hand. Kenna took a deep breath and nodded. She looked at Taye, who tried to give her a smile. All she could manage was a nod in return.

They made their way to the back exit to Fenella's home. At the threshold, Kenna paused and turned back to look at Taye.

"Destroy him," she said.

Taye nodded a promise, and watched as her sister and Fenella disappeared into the night.

Taye's legs wobbled, and Macall caught her before she collapsed to the ground. Tears slipped silently from her eyes, but she refused to utter a sound. If her sister could be that strong, so could she.

"This is the right thing," Macall said, holding her tightly. They stood like that for long moments, until Taye could catch her breath again. "Did I ever tell you," Macall broke the silence, still holding her. "how incredible I think you are? I've never met anyone as strong as you."

Taye drew away, shaking her head as she looked at Adamina, who was sitting and wringing her hands as she no doubt thought of the safety of her own partner. Adamina met her gaze.

"I'm not revolutionary," Taye said, looking back at Macall, then at the door her sister had left through. "I'm just a girl."

Finally the streets emptied, and they made their way slowly back to Corracha. The front door was broken in, and the kitchen was a mess, but nothing else had been touched. Taye imagined what had happened here between Adamina and the king's soldiers, and her heart tightened. She imagined her sister, fleeing through the city. She imagined all of the innocent citizens, terrorized tonight in the search for a single young girl. She imagined it all, and she imagined the king, sitting on his throne, eyes that cut like steel and a grin that showed no mercy.

Destroy him.

She would. Even if it killed her, she would destroy the king of Monadh.

18. Epilogue

The young girl stared out at the vast countryside, the gently sloping hills of long bronze grass swaying in the wind, the sheep dotting the landscape like little white clouds, the sky bright blue and clear overhead.

The older woman at her side squeezed her hand. She pointed to a small village in the distance, the houses clustered around the edge of a lake, a single dirt road leading away from it.

Home.

Or at least, it would be home for a little while. Until it was safe to return to the city. Until her sister took on the monster sitting on the throne. Until.

Until then, she was needed here.

She was needed here, for rebellions did not begin and end in cities. Rebellions did not spread without someone to spread them.

Rebellions did not grow without someone to lead them.